

A Study on Pathways and Mechanisms of National Identity Construction by Domestic Trend Brands

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of globalization and cultural diversity, the domestic trend phenomenon has rapidly emerged in China's consumer market. Domestic fashion brands have become a vital cultural bridge connecting China and the world, beloved by domestic consumers while increasingly occupying a pivotal position in the global fashion landscape. This marks a shift in China's consumer culture from its past "Western worship" to its current "cultural confidence." This study adopts a theoretical perspective grounded in affective communication and semiotics, using the Li-Ning brand as a specific case study to explore the mechanisms through which domestic trend products contribute to the construction of national identity among Chinese consumers. This study clearly reveals the core pathways and underlying operational mechanisms through which domestic trend brands foster consumer cultural identity, providing a solid theoretical foundation for both academia and industry to understand the socio-psychological motivations behind the domestic trend phenomenon.

KEYWORDS

Emotional communication; Symbolic consumption; National trend brands; Ethnic identity

1 Introduction

The 2024 Youth National Trend Brands and Nation-Building Observation Report reveals that 80.7% of surveyed young people regard national trend brands as the barometer of contemporary youth fashion. From Li-Ning's successful debut of its "Wudao" collection at New York Fashion Week to numerous established brands proactively incorporating national trend elements to launch new products aligned with current consumer demands, a powerful wave of national trend has profoundly impacted China's consumer market. The rise of the national trend has manifested itself in a series of remarkable commercial achievements while also emerging as a cultural phenomenon worthy of close attention and in-depth study in contemporary society. Today, domestic trend consumption is no longer confined to consumers' simple pursuit of a product's utility value. Instead, it has gradually evolved into a social behavior through which consumers seek identity belonging, achieve emotional resonance, and establish cultural identity.

How domestic brands can participate in and even actively shape consumers' national identity through emotional resonance and symbolic consumption. This issue directly touches upon the core characteristics of contemporary consumer society, where consumption is no longer merely an economic act but a process of meaning production and identity construction. This study integrates affective communication theory with symbolic consumption theory to construct a comprehensive analytical framework. It then develops specific arguments along the logical thread of "intrinsic motivation—materialized carriers—generative mechanisms."

2 Emotional transmission: the internal driving force behind building brand identity for domestic trend brands

2.1 The emotional awakening of collective memory

Emotional arousal is a key concept within the S-O-R model proposed by Mehrabian (1965) based on the "stimulus-response" framework. It refers to the physiological or psychological arousal state triggered by emotions, which induces unique emotional experiences in individuals and can further motivate behavior ^[1]. The underlying concepts of brand identity originate from social psychology. Brand identification refers to consumers' internalization and integration of a brand's external image, thereby demonstrating a sense of identification and belonging toward the brand ^[2]. The emotional communication campaigns of domestic trend brands primarily build brand identity by awakening collective memories. This process transcends the traditional model of marketing that relies solely on advertising, forming an emotional mobilization approach that penetrates deep into the social psychological level. Li Ning China proactively led young designers on field trips to historically and culturally rich sites such as the Xi'an Stele Forest Museum, the Yunju Temple Stone Carvings, and the Dunhuang Murals, enabling them to study these cultural resources steeped in profound historical significance. It serves as a rich and unique source of inspiration for designers while successfully awakening shared cultural memories prevalent among consumers.

This emotion not only bridges past and present emotional experiences, bridging the gap of time, but also fosters a warm, familiar sense of cultural security. By purchasing these products, consumers seem to touch the past, finding a certain, continuous anchor of identity in a rapidly changing era, thereby reinforcing the collective consciousness of “who we are” and “where we come from.”

2.2 The narrative of self-reliance and struggle

The emotional narrative of the national trend also resonates deeply with the contemporary theme of “national rejuvenation” in China, constructing a narrative of relentless self-improvement and striving. The development history of many domestic brands is an inspiring story of breaking free from the “Made in China” contract manufacturing label to reach the pinnacle of “Created in China” branding. Li-Ning's brand revival serves as the prime example: from Olympic champion Li Ning's personal journey, through the brand's period of decline, to its successful return to the global stage through design innovation and cultural confidence. This journey itself is a dramatic underdog story. This brand narrative resonates deeply with consumers by aligning with the grand national story of contemporary China's transformation from poverty and weakness to prosperity and strength. When consumers choose Li-Ning, they are in a sense casting their vote for this national spirit of “self-reliance and courage to break through.” Through their purchasing decisions, they participate in this collective narrative of striving, sharing in a shared collective confidence and passion for striving that says, “We can do it.”

2.3 Diverse channels for emotional narratives

Media exposure is the crucial link through which mass media influences cultural identity. Media exposure refers to the audience's behavior of engaging with and utilizing specific media, manifested in the manner and frequency of exposure^[3]. On social media, users' reposting behavior significantly accelerates the speed of information dissemination, and emotions spread alongside this reposting activity. National trend brands create emotionally resonant content that sparks organic user sharing, generating an emotional multiplier effect in communication. Li Ning's collaboration with the Palace Museum garnered over 56 million video views, serving as a prime example of emotional diffusion.

Li-Ning China also focuses on building emotional connections with consumers through social media. Li Ning's designers can engage with consumers on social media to gain deeper insights into consumer needs, cultivate them into opinion leaders, and continuously strengthen consumer loyalty. This direct communication enables brands to swiftly capitalize on consumer trends, gain deep insights into consumer needs, and simultaneously deliver brand value more efficiently.

3 Symbolic consumption: the materialized vehicle for constructing brand identity in domestic trend brands

3.1 The symbolic system of visual symbols

In this new era of increasingly mature consumer society, the exploration of self-directed individualism is sparking a new wave of transformation in consumption patterns. Goods are no longer mere symbols of ostentatious display for singular external resources, but rather symbols that are continuously created and shared^[4]. The visual symbol system within the national trend's symbolic framework unambiguously signifies “Chinese identity” through highly refined and redesigned visual elements. The four square Chinese characters “中国李宁” are prominently printed on the apparel. The very emergence of Chinese characters presents a visual challenge to cultural confidence, becoming the most distinctive symbol of identity.

Li-Ning excels at blending elements of traditional Chinese culture with contemporary fashion language. Its “Enlightenment” series sneakers embody Confucian culture and employ Chinese calligraphy as an artistic expression, conveying the spiritual pursuit of “self-reflection, self-realization, and self-creation.” The 2025 Palace Museum collaboration collection seamlessly integrates iconic elements such as the Hall of Supreme Harmony, window lattice patterns, and blue-and-white lock-and-brocade motifs. These traditional designs have been modernized through simplification and contemporary styling, artfully incorporated into the tailoring of contemporary garments. These totems are the distilled essence of millennia of culture. Their presence transforms products into wearable, living “cultural heritage.” These totemic symbols, imbued with cultural depth, offer consumers an easily recognizable and applicable “Chinese-style” visual solution, making abstract national identity tangible and within reach.

3.2 The experience system of product symbols

The product symbol experience system constructed by domestic trend brands transcends mere visual embellishment, instead deeply embedding symbolic meaning into product functionality, structure, and user experience. This creates a perceptible symbolic system that extends from the surface to the core. This system transforms abstract cultural values and emotions into tangible realities that consumers can personally experience through concrete product features, user experiences, and innovative narratives. It achieves a profound shift from observation to usage and ultimately to identification. A prime example is Li Ning naming its top-tier cushioning technology platform “䨻” —an obscure ancient Chinese character originally meaning thunderous roar. When applied to material technology, it transforms the abstract sensation of energy return underfoot into a thunderous sensory image. Not only does it enhance technical memorability and communicability, but it also infuses the product with a unique cultural aura and identity.

Li-Ning China employs a dual-track strategy of classic reinterpretation and innovative storytelling to build a distinctive product symbol experience system. Transforming the profound heritage of ethnic culture from abstract symbolic landscapes into tangible, wearable, and tangibly perceptible everyday realities. The entire process of consumers selecting, purchasing, styling, and wearing Li-Ning products is not merely a simple act of consumption. It is also an engagement in a cultural practice and identity construction concerning contemporary Chinese youth. Precisely for this reason, Li-Ning's products transcend their physical functionality to become symbolic carriers that connect with individual emotions, awaken shared national memories, and embody cultural confidence of the era. Through their interaction with these products, consumers continually experience the allure of national culture, reinforcing their sense of cultural identity.

3.3 The practical symbols of consumption behavior

The act of purchasing and using domestic trend products itself has been imbued with profound symbolic meaning, becoming a form of performative symbolism. In today's social context, choosing to buy Li-Ning over Nike is not merely a personal aesthetic preference, but a declaration of cultural stance and values. This behavior sends a clear signal to others and to oneself that one identifies with Chinese culture and belongs to the culturally confident younger generation. As Bourdieu points out, cultural consumption is essentially a struggle for symbolic power. Consumers from different social strata seek out groups with similar aesthetic tastes through cultural consumption, thereby demonstrating or maintaining their position within the social space. Consuming domestic trend products thus becomes an entry ticket and identity ritual for individuals joining an imagined community. Through daily repetitive practices, internal emotions and affiliations are externalized into concrete social actions, transforming national identity from a psychological state into visible and recognizable social identity markers.

National trend brands have meticulously constructed a multi-layered, perceptible symbolic system, transforming abstract emotions and identity into tangible objects and behaviors available for consumption. This elevates consumption beyond mere economic exchange, transforming it into a culturally symbolic practice through which national identity finds its material expression. By consuming these symbols imbued with meaning, consumers not only satisfy material needs but also repeatedly express and construct their sense of self-identity and group belonging.

4 Interaction and consolidation: the mechanisms of ethnic identity formation and its ultimate realization

4.1 The path of transformation from emotion to symbol

During the interaction and consolidation phase, ethnic identity is ultimately achieved through a dynamic generation mechanism. The transition from fleeting affection to stable identification requires a critical process of transformation and consolidation, revealing how emotions, symbols, and identity coalesce within social interactions. According to data from China Youth Net, 54.4% of surveyed young people prioritize domestic fashion products for their daily outfits, signaling that domestic fashion has evolved from a temporary trend into a stable consumer preference. Regarding reasons for selection, People's Daily Online reports indicate that high visual appeal for street style, comfortable and practical wear, and cultural resonance rank as the top three factors. This demonstrates that the conversion of emotional appeal into consumption is not driven solely by cultural impulse, but rather by the combined effects of visual appeal, practicality, and cultural resonance.

Awakened emotions do not automatically translate into purchasing behavior; a crucial psychological decision-making process exists in between—namely, the conversion of emotional momentum into consumer desire. When consumers are stirred by brand narratives to feel nostalgia, pride, or self-empowerment, these emotions instinctively seek a tangible object to attach themselves to. At this moment, the symbolic system constructed by domestic trend brands provides precisely this object. Gen Z's identification with domestic trend consumption stems from a shared emotional connection

and cultural support for Chinese heritage rooted in their collective identity as “children of China.” This trend consumption serves as a tangible practice through which Gen Z inherits and innovates upon the profound cultural legacy of Chinese civilization. Generation Z is inextricably linked to the internet, closely following national development with hearts full of ideals and patriotic fervor. They harbor immense enthusiasm for national affairs, social progress, and cultural innovation. Their embrace of domestic trends in consumption serves as a barometer reflecting the direction of era-defining developments and the broader interests of society ^[5].

4.2 The interactive ritual from symbol to identity

The sense of belonging derived from a single act of consumption may be fleeting and individual. The core reason why national trend identity achieves reinforcement and consolidation lies in the construction of a powerful “interactive ritual space.” According to sociologist Randall Collins' theory of the “interactive ritual chain,” a successful ritual requires four elements: group gathering, boundary setting, shared focus, and shared emotional state. The domestic trend consumption scenario perfectly meets these conditions.

At the community aggregation level, online platforms such as Weibo super topics, Xiaohongshu hashtags, and brand fan groups consolidate dispersed consumers into cohesive communities. A People's Daily Online survey reveals that 36.7% of young respondents chose domestic fashion items after being influenced by bloggers' recommendations. Young people have built collective gatherings and shared interests in virtual spaces through methods like content promotion and check-ins. Offline pop-up stores, fashion week events, and in-store activities have created physical gathering spaces. According to data from People's Daily Online, 56.3% of young respondents wear national-style fashion during cultural activities, while 49.7% wear it during festive celebrations. An increasing number of everyday spaces are becoming ceremonial sites for displaying cultural identity. These offline practices reinforce the group's sense of boundaries and participation through physical engagement and visual unity. At the boundary-setting level, consumers who wear specific domestic fashion brands and employ particular discourses form invisible group boundaries with those who choose other brands. At the level of shared focus, the launch of a new product, a brand's cross-industry collaboration, or an uplifting brand story can all become focal points of collective attention among group members. At the emotional sharing level, members share shopping experiences, showcase outfits, and celebrate the brand's achievements within the community, fostering shared joy, pride, and a sense of belonging.

In this interactive ritual, individual consumption experiences are amplified into collective revelry, with personal emotional energy continuously intensifying through cyclical feedback. Ultimately, the ceremony yields a solid sense of collective unity, sustained emotional energy, symbols representing the group, and a moral sense that upholds the community. At this point, ethnic identity transforms from an abstract concept into a palpable, emotionally charged collective experience forged through repeated communal interactions.

4.3 The construction and consolidation of ethnic identity

Through the aforementioned emotional drivers, symbolic bearers, and ritual reinforcement, domestic trend consumption ultimately fosters three stable and enduring forms of identity at both the individual and collective levels.

A sense of cultural belonging constitutes the primary characteristic of domestic trend consumption. Young consumers gain systematic understanding of the stylistic characteristics and cultural contexts of clothing from different historical periods through exposure to domestic fashion trends. This continuous accumulation of knowledge helps individuals build a clear cultural cognitive framework. The sense of cultural identity ambiguity that often arises in the context of globalization is effectively alleviated through the consumption of domestic trends. Consumers are able to establish deep connections with the millennia-old traditions of Chinese culture, gaining a stable sense of spiritual belonging and cultural positioning.

Collective self-esteem has been significantly strengthened through global comparative analysis. According to Zhimeng's report “Leap and Evolution: New Landscape of Chinese Brand Consumption | 2025 China Brand Trend Insights,” 70.5% of consumers explicitly stated they are willing to pay a premium for Chinese brands featuring unique design concepts or rich cultural heritage. This data indicates that domestic brands have successfully shed their past stereotype as “cheap substitutes,” transforming into important vehicles for consumers to express their cultural confidence. When domestic brands gain recognition on the global stage and “Chinese design” earns worldwide acclaim, consumers experience a profound sense of shared pride. They connect personal self-esteem with national collective dignity, finding self-worth enhancement through the collective achievement of consuming these homegrown products.

The characteristic of identity unity effectively addresses the challenge of integrating multiple identities that modern individuals face in daily life. Data from the same report indicates that 84.3% of the surveyed consumer group reported a significant increase in their choice of Chinese brands compared to the previous year. National trend consumption, with its unique cultural attributes and value connotations, helps young consumers navigate the complexities of modern society

by resolving the dilemma of fragmented identity. This choice achieves an organic integration of “Chinese identity” and “trendy attitude,” enabling consumers to satisfy their purchasing needs while simultaneously affirming their cultural positioning and identity recognition.

5 Conclusion

This study systematically analyzes the emotional communication strategies and symbolic consumption practices of domestic trend brands, revealing the intrinsic pathways and specific mechanisms through which these brands construct national identity. Research findings indicate that the process of constructing this national identity begins with the brand's emotional evocation of collective memory, cultural archetypes, and the spirit of self-reliance. This emotional resonance provides the crucial internal driving force for the initial formation of national identity. By establishing a comprehensive symbolic system encompassing visual symbols, product symbols, and behavioral symbols, the brand provides tangible material carriers and participatory practices for what were originally abstract emotions and identifications. Under the combined catalysis of the “emotion-symbol” transformation pathway and community “interactive rituals,” transient emotional resonance at the individual level gradually settles and solidifies into stable collective identity. This collective identity manifests concretely through three distinct dimensions: cultural belonging, collective self-esteem, and identity unity.

Theoretically, the core value of this study lies in organically integrating emotional communication theory with symbolic consumption theory to construct an analytical framework capable of deeply explaining the complex socio-psychological motivations underlying the national trend phenomenon. This framework holds positive significance for deepening research in the fields of consumer culture and social identity. At the practical level, this study offers insights for domestic trend brands to achieve sustainable development. Domestic trend brands must move beyond the superficial appropriation and grafting of cultural symbols. They should delve into the essence and core values of traditional culture to build brand narratives and consumer experiences that resonate emotionally and possess cultural depth. This approach enables brands to transition from short-lived viral popularity to sustained, enduring appeal, maintaining long-term vitality amid fierce market competition.

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